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KT photo | **Tim Bath**

House of Burgess: A more relaxed look at the Democrats

MSNBC lightens the mood of a traditional debate with Friday forum

By Rob Burgess
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When the three remaining Democratic presidential candidates take the stage Saturday at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa, it will only be the second such event for the party this election cycle. (Since the first one, former Virginia Sen. Jim Webb and, later, former Rhode Island Gov. Lincoln Chafee have dropped out of the race.)

But, on Friday, an event broadcast on MSNBC and hosted by Rachel Maddow may have done a better job of allowing these candidates a

meaningful forum than any televised event this year in either party. The First in the South Democratic Candidates Forum took place in front of a crowd of 3,000 at Winthrop University in Rock Hill, South Carolina, and was hosted by the South Carolina Democratic Party and 12 other Southern state Democratic parties. Split into three distinct sections, it featured Maddow grilling former Maryland Gov. Martin O'Malley, Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton each in turn.

O'MALLEY

Right away, the vibe for this event was different. Instead of barking from behind podiums on a high-up stage, Maddow and the candidates were in the middle of a sunken bowl surrounded by the audience. There was no giant Air Force One looming behind them.

Each candidate was given a short video compilation introduction. O'Malley's showed him playing a guitar, before reminding voters he is, in fact, running for president. When the questions begin, he proved wooden in his delivery. Maddow rightly focused on the political losses felt by Democrats on the local level, a problem O'Malley didn't really answer. Nor did he have a strong response to the recent riots in Baltimore, the city he led as mayor.

Cards: Like every such event, the network felt the need to lighten the mood. In addition to looking at old photographs of themselves, Maddow gave the candidates the illusion of choice in the matter by presenting each

with a fan of downward-facing cards and asking them to pick one. O'Malley was asked: Hunt or fish? Fish. High-speed rail or travel to Mars? Both. Are you a smoker? “Never, ever.” Most impractical item of clothing? Kilt. “It was given to me.”

SANDERS

Unlike the mostly-sanitized O'Malley introductory video, Sanders' version makes reference to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs scandal. Once in the hot seat, it's clear someone told Sanders to come out swinging against Clinton. He says he was always against the Keystone XL Pipeline “as opposed to other unnamed candidates.” Though he held the crowd in the palm of his hand for most of his time, it's clear MSNBC was not considering him the most viable candidate.

Cards: “How many pairs of underwear do I have?” Sanders joked as he anticipated the questions. “Am I Larry David?” He clearly hates this part of campaigning. What's your dream job if it couldn't be president: President of CNN. Things you most miss most? Paper books, peace and quiet. Do you curse? “Not on this show!” In answer to a question about the biggest public misconception about him, he talks about family, a pointed change from the debate when he didn't mention them at all.

CLINTON

I didn't see any scandals mentioned in her intro as she received a fawning entry. Hillary has obviously been told to loosen up as she leaned hard in the chair. She also clearly knows where she is and who she is talking to. For example, she was described as an “unenthusiastic supporter of the death penalty.” As she explained why she wants to keep it for terrorism cases, she used multiple words per sentence to soften the blow of her harsh opinions landing on liberal ears. She gave a solid performance as, once again, the red carpet was laid out before her.

Cards: What new language would you learn? Spanish. Introvert or extrovert? Both. If you had to pick a GOP candidate as vice presidential nominee? “I am dodging the question.” Hush puppy: food, footwear or Fido? “Eating hush puppies in my Hush Puppies.”

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